

353//365 by MissSunFlower94

Category: Stranger Things (TV 2016)

Genre: Drabbles, F/M, Gen, Holidays, Other Additional Tags to Be Added

Language: English

Characters: The Stranger Things Kids

Relationships: Eleven/Mike Wheeler, Max/Lucas Sinclair, Will Byers & Eleven & Dustin Henderson & Max & Lucas Sinclair & Mike Wheeler

Status: In-Progress

Published: 2017-11-15

Updated: 2017-12-08

Packaged: 2022-04-03 05:15:33

Rating: General Audiences

Warnings: No Archive Warnings Apply

Chapters: 7

Words: 6,739

Publisher: archiveofourown.org

Summary:

Events and holidays during the year Mike tried to contact Eleven and those same days in the year that follows the closing of the Gate

1. Ballgown

Author's Note:

The Snow Ball

Saturday December 17, 1983

“Hello? El? It’s- It’s Mike, again.”

He sits and listens to the silence for a few seconds. He thinks to ask if she copies, but decides against it. If she’s there, she’ll let him know. Somehow.

In lieu of asking for a sign, he’s now started to tell her about his days. Hoping that, if she is receiving his messages, she knows he still considers her a part of their party and a part of his life.

It feels silly today. It feels important today.

“Today was the Snow Ball.”

It feels silly *because* of how important it also feels (feelings are weird).

“I didn’t go. None of us did. I mean- I didn’t go last year either and wouldn’t have gone this year anyway if it weren’t for you- I mean, that is-“ He sighs, running his free hand through his hair. “I’ve always thought it was a dumb and cheesy but... I think it would have been fun to go with you. We could have laughed about it together, and we could have found a real dress just for you – not one of Nancy’s hand-me-downs.”

He thinks of how the guys would laugh, if they could hear him then; nervously babbling about the stupid Snow Ball dance. He never got the appeal before – there were so many better things he could be doing than spending hours crowded in the gym listening to boring music. But he means what he tells El; he would have enjoyed it, if he were with her. It would have been fun just to watch her experience it. He wonders how much music she’s ever gotten to hear, or if she’s ever gotten to wear clothes that weren’t passed down to her. He

wonders if she's still in Nancy's dress right now, somewhere cold and alone.

He shakes the image. El can do anything. He *has* to believe she's safe now.

Forcing a smile into his voice he says, "Anyway, I guess there's always next year."

Saturday December 15, 1984

The Police song fades out but Mike keeps his forehead against El's, smiling, feeling like he can barely breathe. But, like, in a good way.

"El! You did make it!" Dustin's voice sharply ends the moment. Mike wants to be upset about that, but El smiles first at him and then at their interruption and he can't be upset when she's happy.

Her smile fades to her – somewhat characteristic – confused frown, and she reaches out to pat the top of Dustin's hair-gelled head. Mike tries to contain his laughter, and manages pretty well up until El simply says, "...*Why?*"

Dustin glowers a bit at them both, but doesn't seem as full of nervous energy as he was when he came in. Mike is glad, just as he had been seeing his sister dancing with him before El arrived. "My hair is rad as hell – not my fault neither of you know fashion." Dustin pauses and looks El over. "Actually, never mind: just Mike. That's a nice dress, El."

Mike rolls his eyes, but El looks to be positively glowing and he suddenly remembers a year ago, thinking about how El has probably never worn anything that was hers. Even what she was wearing when he saw her for the first time in 353 days (cool as it had looked on her) didn't look like it was hers.

The blue and pink dress, the gelled back curls, the lipgloss that he can still taste... this looks like she's dressing up, sure. But it all looks like it's things she's finally gotten to *choose*. He can only imagine what that must mean to her.

Lucas and Max are still having a *moment* but a minute later Will joins them, greeting El in his shy but sincere way. "Hi El. I'm glad you could make it."

Mike feels her hand slip back into his. "Me too."

2. Calling-in

Summary for the Chapter:

Christmas

Sunday December 25, 1983

“El? It’s me. It’s um, it’s been 43 days since I last saw you.”

The silence isn’t really silence. Mike can hear music playing upstairs, and he knows it’s only a matter of time before his mother calls him back to join the rest of the family for dinner.

“It’s-“ he pauses. “You... probably don’t know what Christmas is. They probably didn’t celebrate it at the lab, did they?”

It’s stupid, the question itself as well as believing that she’s really going to answer. But if she is listening, somewhere, he wants her to feel included. Maybe she’s somewhere hiding, like Will was, and doesn’t feel safe answering. Maybe she can’t hear him today, but could have heard him yesterday and might hear him when he tries again tomorrow. Mike just knows he can’t stop trying.

“Well, today is Christmas. There’s a whole long history about where it came from and why we have it but that’s not important. It’s a holiday where your whole family gets together and opens presents that they get for each other. You also get things for your friends, if you can. It doesn’t have to be anything big or important – it’s just a way of showing people that you like them. That you’re thankful that they’re around.”

Mike had gotten more Star Wars figurines from his family, and Dustin and Lucas had gotten him some new monster minis to use in their games of D&D. Then, with his friends help, Mike had pooled most of his money to get Will a nice set of watercolor paints and paper. They spent all Christmas day playing the newest campaign Mike had created, and for a while everything feels... pretty normal. Like the events from a month ago were a weird dream.

But now that everyone has gone home, he's sitting under the blanket fort that he hasn't taken down – won't take down – and thinking about the one person he is most thankful to have met, who isn't here, and he thinks that things will never be exactly like they were. He thinks that he doesn't want her to become nothing more than a dream.

Trying not to feel too morose on Christmas, he tells El about his gifts and a bit about the campaign. "I don't know what I would have gotten you, if you were here," he says. "But I wish you were. Here, I mean. Christmas isn't just about giving things or getting things. It's about spending time with the people that you like. I guess... I guess I miss spending time with you. I-"

"Michael!" His mother's voice calls from the stairway. "It's time to eat!" He's not too hungry (Dustin had brought snacks for D&D), and he knows if he doesn't eat his mom will ask what's wrong again. But if he doesn't go upstairs she'll definitely ask. It's still Christmas and Christmas is about family.

"Gotta go, El," he says, ready to turn the radio off. Then, last minute he adds, "Merry Christmas."

Tuesday December 25, 1984

To his surprise, Nancy doesn't roll her eyes when Mike brings the radio with him to the living room to join her. There's some old black and white Christmas movie on TV that he doesn't care about, and he is still reading through the new D&D Companion Set that Lucas got him (he says Max wants to join the game, and Mike's stuck trying to think of what class a Zoomer is closest to). Nancy isn't really watching the movie either, busy reading some book that Jonathan must have got her, but they're both in matching sweaters and the silence isn't awkward. She does keep glancing at the radio, but doesn't ask.

He's talked to El twice since the Snow Ball, when she used her powers to tap into the channel. They weren't long conversations and

Mike could tell she didn't like it; lying to Hopper now that the Chief is apparently trying to be more honest with her. Mike didn't like it either, but having heard that that she wouldn't be able to be seen for another year? It just wasn't fair.

He doesn't know if she is going to call him tonight, but he feels better having the radio with him. He doesn't know what she is doing for Christmas, if the Chief is doing anything special for her. He hopes that the man at least bought her something. She deserves-

"Hello?"

Mike drops his guide so fast it falls off the couch with a thump. Nancy jumps a little, raising her eyebrows as he grabs for the radio. "Hello! Hello, El?"

There's a brief pause, and then unmistakably, her voice. "Hi Mike." She sounds a little more muffled than she usually does. "Merry Christmas."

He can't stop smiling. "Merry Christmas. I'm sorry I couldn't give you anything." Again.

"That's all right. This is my present."

Nancy is laughing softly. Mike can feel his face turning pink and tries to think of what to say to that. "Um- uh- did the Chief- I mean, did you get anything nice?"

There's another short silence. "Yes," El says. "This is my present."

Mike frowns, trying to figure out what she's saying before it hits him. His heart races at the thought. "Wait, El... wait. Are you calling from an *actual radio*?"

"Yes," she says again. He can hear her smile, he thinks, and understands why she sounds different this time. "We 'still have to be careful' he says, but he wants me to be able to talk. To everyone."

"That's- that's great! That's-" he begins, pausing when he notices Nancy's still smiling, a bit smug actually. "Hold on, El." To Nancy he says, "Did you know about this?"

“Well,” she draws the word out for a second. “Hopper *might* have come by the Byers’ place asking about what kind of radio Will uses to talk to you and... Jonathan isn’t great at keeping secrets.” Mike doesn’t know what his expression is (frankly he doesn’t know what he’s *feeling*), but it makes Nancy’s smile soften. “Merry Christmas. Now don’t let me keep you-” she puts a marker in her book and stands up. “And don’t stay up too late.”

Mike watches her go and smiles before returning to El.

3. Should Be Forgot

Summary for the Chapter:

New Year's

Saturday December 31, 1983 – Sunday January 1, 1984

Holidays were the easiest days to talk to El, because at least Mike has something interesting to tell her.

“Hi El. It’s me.”

It’s only been 49 days (*only* 49? 49 days feels like a lifetime, 49 days is 49 days *too many*) and it’s getting harder to think of what to tell her, other than what went on at school or how Will is doing, or something the guys said. His calls feel repetitive and boring. He has to remind himself that he’s not necessarily entertaining her. He’s reaching out. Trying to let her know, wherever she is, that he is still here. That he will always be here.

But it’s still nice to have something to talk about.

“It’s New Year’s.” He looks at his watch. “We’re a few minutes away from it being 1984. Usually I stay up with my family and watch... there’s a big party you can watch on TV with a big countdown to midnight and they always let me stay up for it, even if it’s a weeknight. But... I didn’t feel like it this year. I told mom I was tired and getting a cold so she let me go to bed early.”

He does, in fact, have an irritating cold but that isn’t why he’s gone up to his room early. The fact that it’s going to be a new year feels weird to him. Feels again like everyone – like the whole *universe* – is trying to reset. He doesn’t like that when talking about everything that happened, with Will, with El, with the people at the lab, he’ll have to say “*last year*”. It makes it all sound so much longer ago than it feels. His family doesn’t understand that, he’s not even sure Nancy does. The guys don’t seem to understand either, too happy to have Will back to think about all that has changed.

Will understands, but Mike is hesitant to bring it up around him. Paradoxically, he wants Will to feel like things are normal again. If anyone deserves to put all of this in the past year it's him. Mike will never hold that against him.

After a few minutes of silence, lost in his own thoughts, Mike glances again at his watch. 12:08. He's been quiet longer than he thought. "Happy New Year, El," he whispers to the radio. "I hope this year is- I mean, I hope you have a good year."

I hope you come home, he thinks but doesn't say.

Monday December 31, 1984

For a minute Mike has difficulty understanding what he sees.

Then El waves from where she sits on the floor in front of the TV in the Byers' living room. Beside her, Will is grinning like he just told the greatest joke of all time.

There's a second of silence before chaos erupts. The guys and Max, who have all biked over together to celebrate the New Year with a big sleepover at the Byers' house this year, all yell various startled obscenities and run over to hug El.

Mike is happy, overjoyed, but too shocked to move. "I- but- how is-?"

"Language, boys!" Ms. Byers calls, coming in from the kitchen. She notices that Mike is still dumbstruck in the doorway and smiles. "Hopper and Jane apparently came to a-"

"Compromise," El finished, finally disentangling herself from the hug. "He says I can come here, but we can't go anywhere else. And he has to be around, too. It's okay because people already think he's '*always hanging around this place anyway*'."

Ms. Byers clears her throat, but doesn't say anything to that.

"Where is he now?" Dustin asks. "We didn't see the van."

“Getting more snacks,” El says. “He’ll be back soon.” She notices he still hasn’t moved, and offers him a shy smile. “This is good, right? Better than just the radio.”

Forget Christmas, this is the best thing Mike has ever received. *Ever*. “Yes,” he says, shaking his paralysis and smiling so wide it almost hurts. “Yes, yes way better than the radio.” El’s smile grows at that, and he finally drops his bags to join the rest of the group. She hugs him immediately, as though it has been another year since she saw him last and not a few weeks. It feels the same to Mike. If the Chief’s goal with giving her the radio had been to make them want to see each other less, it had failed horribly.

Dustin, Lucas and Max make various gagging sounds which Mike and El ignore. They only let go when Will comments about the Times Square party on TV. But even as they gather around to watch, Mike keeps looking at El – still expecting her to vanish somehow. She catches him looking more than once and smiles, and Mike thinks that this coming year is *definitely* going to be a good one.

Notes for the Chapter:

honestly though, if anyone even began to notice "Chief's been spending a lot of time at Joyce Byer's place" it would immediately be shrugged off with "Well we all know they have the hots for each other" true or not, it's an excellent cover and it's actually probably safer than the kids coming out to the cabin.

4. Red Roses

Summary for the Chapter:

Valentine's Day

Tuesday February 14, 1984

“El? If you’re there, it’s me. It’s day 94.” (Almost 100 days. *Holy shit.*)
“It’s um, 8:21 PM. If you can hear me, please let me know.”

Mike is left listening to the static crackling of the radio, and nothing else. He sighs, tempted to leave the message to that and nothing more.

“I told you about Valentine’s Day before, right?” He can’t remember what he has and hasn’t told El sometimes. He feels like he tells her everything; he feels like he doesn’t tell her nearly enough. “The day everyone in class buys candy for each other and everything is heart-shaped? Um- that was today. The candy was nice but it’s kind of a dumb holiday. It’s all the kind of stuff Nancy worries about with boyfriends and stuff and no one else cares.”

There’s another silence, and Mike realizes he isn’t being entirely honest with El. He thinks for a minute that it doesn’t matter, that she can’t hear him anyway, and immediately admonishes himself. Is 100 days all it’s going to take before he loses faith in her? What kind of friend is he?

“I mean- I guess, it’s like the Snow Ball. In a way. Yeah we all get stuff for each other in class but if you have someone you like, like more than a regular friend, you call them your Valentine and you get them something special, like *nice* chocolate or flowers. Steve got Nancy a bouquet of roses. You never met him before, but he seemed like a boring douchebag kind of guy - but I guess Nancy never had a guy get her flowers for Valentine's Day so she’s pretty happy.”

He plays with the edge of one of the blankets in El’s fort (it’s *El’s* fort and always will be) and decides to finally say it. Maybe she doesn’t understand what it means just like she didn’t understand the Snow

Ball... but it matters to him so he'll say it.

"I bought you flowers, too. In case you came back. Or in case you're here." It's not like Christmas, where he didn't know what to get her anyways. Valentine's Day at least there's expected things. "After seeing the one's Steve got Nancy I ran by the convenience store after school. They were on sale so I didn't spend too much or anything. None of the guys know - I didn't think they'd really understand. I just left them where we met out in the woods, that night. I don't know if you remember it, but I thought it was the best place. I- I hope you get them."

Silence.

"If you do," he adds, and *damn it* he can hear his voice getting wobbly and his throat starts feeling thick. "If you do, just- just let me know. Please."

He turns the radio off, rubs his sleeve over his eyes, and feels overwhelmingly stupid.

Thursday, February 14, 1985

It's gotten rare for Max not to be around for Party conversations, and it's strange that Mike now finds that strange. They've been getting along better over the past few months, and although they're still very different people Mike's learned that having a different way of looking at things actually balances the group in a way that's... pretty nice.

"You didn't get her anything?" Dustin is saying. "It's like, *The* day and you didn't get her anything?"

Lucas looks over his shoulder, as if expecting to find the redhead there, despite them being in the boys' restroom during lunch and Mike thinks it's also pretty hilarious to watch Lucas - usually so practical - losing his mind over her.

"Have you been getting girl advice from Steve Harrington again? You know, the guy his sister dumped?" Lucas jerks a thumb at Mike, who

raises his hands in a '*leave me out of this*' fashion. When Dustin just rolls his eyes, Lucas continues, "I didn't think she'd want anything! She was talking about how she hated this 'lame-ass holiday' all month!"

"Then what's the problem?" Will asks, equal parts willing to help and completely lost.

Lucas sighs, frustrated. "I don't know - I mean, maybe it is like Dustin said: it's *The* day. Now that we're here and I see her, I just feel like I still should have done something." He looks at Mike. "What did you get El?"

"What?" Mike asks, put on the spot. "Nothing yet."

"*What?*" Everyone, even Will, choruses in nothing short of horror.

"You're all useless!" Dustin exclaims.

"Who are you and what have you done with Mike Wheeler?" Lucas reaches up as if to feel his forehead before Mike knocks his hand away.

"Nothing yet, I said!" He defends, blushing. "I'm gonna get her roses or something! I just don't know when she's gonna be out at Will's next and I don't want them sitting out and wilting like last year!"

There's a second before he realizes what he says, and feels his red face get even redder.

"*Last year?*" Dustin says. "Wait, did you actually leave flowers somewhere for El last year?" (It's a testament to how much brighter things have gotten in the past few months - the guys wouldn't have touched on the subject of El before, much less teased him, knowing how it hurt.)

"Where'd you leave them?" Lucas adds, clearly happy to put his own troubles aside. "Did you ever tell her? Do you think they're still there?"

Mike gives a long suffering sigh at their antics. "I'm going back to lunch."

5. Miracles

Summary for the Chapter:

Easter

Sunday April 22, 1984

“Hello? El! Hello?”

He was going to call later in the night, but he swears he heard her.

“El? Are you there? Do you copy?”

Not just her breathing, not just intelligible sound, not like the times before where he’s been sure, *so sure* that he heard her. It’s like when they heard Will in the Upside Down. The comparison makes him shiver, not helped by the fact that she now refuses to answer.

"El, *please* if you’re really there, say something!"

There’s nothing to be heard.

He briefly thinks about turning the radio off. It’s Easter and his mother will be calling him up for another big family meal soon. He has his basket of candy next to him in El’s fort, untouched. Easter is one of those annoying holidays that he has to dress up for and spend entirely with family, and the candy feels like a cheap half-assed attempt from adults to make it cool. He outgrew the holiday before he was ten, honestly. Holly was the only one who still looked for eggs, while everyone else in the family endured the boring day.

And this year, on top of everything, the week leading up to the holiday had been filled with people making jokes about Will coming back from the dead. Mike had almost gotten in a fight for his friends’ sake on Friday when someone started badgering him about ‘*performing miracles*’ and treating him like a circus act. Will had told him it was fine but it wasn’t. It was one thing to be picked on for being nerds, or for being short or whatever dumb-ass things the bullies at school came up with, but after what Will had gone through-

Mike is gripping the radio so hard his hand twitches a little in pain and he forces himself to loosen his grip. He's making himself angry again, just thinking about it. Thinking about how he had wished so hard in that moment that El could have been there. El could have shown them a goddamn miracle, and she would have too. She was – is – like him like that, she didn't sit by when people are being picked on – but unlike him, she could actually do something. She is brave and kind and loyal and so much stronger than him. She is the kind of person Mike wants to be, but doesn't think he ever can be – especially with her gone.

“... El?” He tries one more time, quieter this time. Maybe if there are miracles and maybe if people can come back from being gone... she's out there. “El, are you out there?”

But the moment of connection is gone. If there had even been a moment.

He turns off the radio, rests his head on his drawn up knees, and takes a minute to just breathe and collect himself.

The last thing he needs is his parents noticing he's upset.

Sunday April 7, 1985

Mike's mood may have improved since El's return, but his Easter dinner does not feel any less uncomfortable. In fact, now that things with his friends are better there's a clear contrast to show just how dysfunctional the Wheeler household is. At least he and Nancy are getting along better, so at least they roll their eyes in unison when they're parents ignore each other or talk over each other or try to smother them and Holly.

“Did someone leave the television on?” His father asks at one point just as Mike is beginning to wonder how to gracefully get away from the table. In the resulting lull, Mike hears what his father must have. A female voice, muffled, static-y. *El*. Mike jolts up so straight he hits his knees on the bottom of the table and shakes a few plates.

"Mike?" His mother asks. Then, "*Mike!*" she says when he stands up.

"Someone's calling me," he says.

"Well you can talk to them when you're done--"

"I am done!"

"You could help your mother with the dishes for once," his father says. "Honestly, you spend more time on that radio than your sister does talking to her boyfriends--"

"What is that supposed to mean?" Mike says.

"*Dad!*" Nancy says, simultaneously. There's a short tense silence before she continues, taking a breath and clearly trying to calm herself down. "I'll help mom do the dishes, dad. Mike can talk to his friends."

Their dad looks ready to argue, but their mom actually looks between them with something of a bewildered smile. "Are you two working together?" Nancy and Mike exchange glances and half-hearted shrugs.

"I'm going now," Mike says, in lieu of answering that. Nancy starts gathering plates in an effort to deflect parental protests.

He flies down the stairs to his radio. "El? El, I copy – are you there?"

Barely a second passes before, "Mike."

Mike smiles, as he does on reflex when he hears her voice, and hears her say his name. "Are you... okay? Did you need something?"

"No," she says. "Just to talk. Can you talk?"

"Yeah. Yeah, I just got away from Easter dinner so yeah."

"Easter?"

"Did I not tell you about Easter last year?" He honestly can't remember. For a second he's surprised the Chief didn't tell her about

it, and then he thinks about the Chief a bit and decides he's not surprised at all.

"I don't think so," El says. "Can you tell me about it?"

Mike settles into the fort, family dinner put out of his head for the moment, and does just that.

Notes for the Chapter:

After the sweet comments you all left, I might end up writing a companion fic for the Red Roses chapter - and maybe some others in this series, too. :) Thanks for the support.

6. Conversation

Summary for the Chapter:

Six-months

(not a holiday, but significant all the same)

Saturday May 12, 1984

Mike sits cross-legged under El's fort, a fan on the gaming table pointed his direction. The weather is at the point where it is getting warm and humid, but not so much so that his parents would turn on the air conditioner, so the fan is all he has.

"Hey El?" He says conversationally. As though she is right there, and they have been talking for a long time by this point. He's already gone through the motions of most of his calls (*El, can you hear me? El, are you out there?* and today; *El, it's been six months*) but doesn't feel like ending the connection yet. "I know we mentioned it a few times when you were around, but did we ever tell you that there are stories about people with your powers?"

The guys had spent the day reading Xmen comics and talking about what kind of powers and mutations they'd want.

"Made-up people, I mean. But like, it would have been great to show you that, like, you're not a freak, you know? I mean, I guess the Xmen are treated like freaks too, but they band together and stop bad people as a family--"

He stops, sighing, and remembering the way Dustin had brought up that they could literally, probably start their own Superhero team, when they got El back.

"We don't talk about you often," he says, not caring that he has started a new thought aloud. "Or maybe the guys just don't talk about you around me. I don't know. I'm sure they miss you – even Will. It's hard to remember that you never met him?"

Obviously there is no answer. Mike shakes his head and continues.

“Anyways, Dustin said we’d make a great team when you come back.” (*When*. Dustin said *when*, not *if*. It meant more to Mike than he had been willing to say.) “But then Lucas pointed out that you’re the only one who has powers. We’re all kinda useless without you.”

He doesn’t tell El that he had gotten angry at Lucas for saying that, and snapped at him. He’s still angry, but not at Lucas. He never really was angry at his friend if he’s honest; he is angry because he’s right. Because Mike is useless without El. They would have never found Will without her, she saved them all, and now that she was lost and in danger he couldn’t do shit.

He does say, “I’m guess I should probably call Lucas after this-“ *This*, like it was a real conversation. “- and let him know I’m not upset.”

He doesn’t say that they’ll probably talk even less about her now, or that he isn’t sure if that’s a good or bad thing.

Saturday May 4, 1985

Mike and El sit outside, cross-legged in the grass just behind the Byers’ house, talking.

Will is sick – *normal* sick, thank god – but with some prodding by El and Mike and Ms. Byers’ reminder that she would be home all day, the Chief allowed El to stay for a few hours so that she could see him.

“He says he’s getting careless,” El tells him. She’s absently picking clover flowers, running her fingers over tiny petals.

“It’s been six months,” Mike points out. “Six *months*. And nothing has happened. And besides, you’re going to be starting school in the fall, without him hovering over you all the time.”

She nods solemnly. Even at peace as they are, and happy as he knows she is, there is always a quiet seriousness to her. He likes that Will is no longer the only quiet party member. It makes both of them feel more comfortable in their frequent silences and balances Dustin and Lucas and Max’s banter well.

“Mike?” She says, interrupting his own silent thoughts.

“Yeah?”

“Would Will be okay if we read some of his... *Xmen*?” She says the word like it’s the first time she’s said it. Mike blinks, trying to remember conversations they’ve had since they’ve started talking again. He knows they’ve talked about comics, and they’ve read some of Will’s with him (Mike learns that El *loves* comics – the picture cues and lack of large blocks of words make them easier for her to comprehend)... but *Xmen*? He can’t remember.

“Did Will tell you about the *Xmen*, or Dustin?” Dustin is the biggest *Xmen* nerd in their party.

“No,” El says. “You did. Last year.”

It takes Mike a minute to recollect the exact conversation (can he call that a *conversation*?) from a year ago. When he was feeling angry and useless. When he was thinking, though he’d *never* admit it, that he was speaking to no one. He still sometimes got angry, thinking about the year he and El lost, but at least he knows now that he wasn’t useless, that she had heard and that his calls had the desired effect; he let her know she was still wanted.

“You remember that?” He asks at last.

El ducks her head, a rare show of shyness. “I wrote it down.” Mike is sure he must look as shocked as he feels because she continues. “Sometimes I would write down things I didn’t understand, and would ask him about it later-“ Him being Hopper. “-but some things I wanted to wait. To talk to you about, when I saw you again.”

Mike doesn’t really know what to say to that. He knows he’s blushing a bright blotchy red, but he doesn’t care. Knowing that his silly babbling... all the times he tried to fill his own sadness in frustration by telling El the stupid boring details of his days... Not only had she heard, she actually *cared*.

“You...” he clears his throat. El leans forward a little, waiting but not pushing, until he finds words. “You should bring your list, next time.”

Her face lights up, and she nods. They smile stupidly at each other for a minute before she prompts, “Xmen?”

“Xmen! Yes!” Mike hops to his feet. “I’ll go see if Will is awake.” He jogs back to the house, shooting one more smile over his shoulder at her.

7. A Good Day

Summary for the Chapter:

Fourth of July

Monday, July 4, 1984

The spring isn't easy; once the shock of Will returning died down over Christmas break, they're back to being the Freaks at school. Mike, who had never had patience for douchebags before, has even less now. The longer he goes without hearing from El the more hopeless he feels, and sometimes he even finds himself wondering if she did, in fact, die – sacrificing herself to defeat the Demogorgon and save them all. As the days add up and add up, Mike has some very bad days.

But... sometimes Mike has good days.

Summer comes, and sometimes Mike even has a lot of good days in a row.

The break from school takes the pressure of trying to act like any kind of normal off of them all, but Mike thinks that he and Will and feel that the most. Lucas and Dustin are merely happy to have the days free and no worries about homework or grades (though Mike is plenty happy about that too – his bad days have been affecting his grades pretty badly, to his parents, and even his own, frustration). Sometimes when he calls El at night he can go on for hours telling her about his day. He hopes that she is listening, and sharing in his good days. He tells her (and himself) that soon, *very* soon, they'll be having good days together.

Today is the Fourth of July, a day off school, and the guys spend the afternoon and evening at a Barbeque the Sinclair's are throwing, playing with sparklers and pop rockets and riding their bikes around the area before they get ready to go to watch the Hawkins' Fireworks show from a local church parking lot.

It's just as they're about to leave and Mike is compiling everyone's

snacks into his designated backpack, that he hears the static of his radio and for a minute he swears he hears a voice. *Her voice*. Dustin and Lucas are bickering over his head and he snaps "Shut up a second!" before he thinks.

But they listen and go quiet. But so does his com. There's no voice, there's not even anymore static.

"What is it, man?" Dustin asks.

"Why'd you bring your com?" Lucas adds, genuinely confused. "We're all here."

Panicking, Mike says, "I just forgot about it. I'll put it with my sleeping bag now!"

He's already running back to the house while Lucas yells "We're leaving now!" Mike waves the comment off.

Alone, he gets on the radio immediately. He keeps his voice down. "El? El, do you copy?"

He hears nothing but he tries again, a little louder. "El, it's me. I'm here."

Nothing.

Outside, he knows the guys are wondering what he's doing, and the longer he stays the more questions they'll have when he comes back. He hates the idea that he's somehow hiding these calls, but he just knows none of them will understand, not really.

"The guys and I are leaving to watch fireworks soon. I- I don't know if you've seen a firework but they're bright and colorful and loud and um, I guess if you're outside or alone... I hope you're not alone but if you're alone and you hear something loud, it's not guns. It's not guns and it's not bad. It's celebration. I hope you can watch them. I hope we can watch them together sometime."

Mike takes a breath, and realizes he hasn't since he started talking. He feels like he's rushing and feels both guilty and angry at himself for it. El deserves better than that. He doesn't want her to feel like

he's pushing her aside, putting her away, forgetting.

"I gotta go, El." He says at last. "I'll talk to you tomorrow. Promise."

Thursday, July 4, 1985

Mike hears the doorbell ring, and flies up the stairs immediately, hoping to be out the door before his mother accosts his ride.

Too late. Steve Harrington is already getting an earful on Firework safety and getting thanked every third word for hosting the Fourth of the July at his place rather than *'the boys biking down to the quarry with backpacks full of explosives'*.

"It's really no problem, Mrs. Wheeler," Steve says in his frustratingly patient way (he sounds so boring and grown-up; Mike has no idea what Dustin sees in this guy). "Mrs. Henderson is already paying me to watch Dustin and I couldn't keep up with these kids on bikes if I tried."

Mike's patience is far past indulging this conversation. "Come on – can we go already? Everyone is gonna be there before us!"

"Hey! Chill for two seconds!" Steve says. "Everyone is not already there as one- I have the house keys and two- like, half of everyone is packed into the back of my car right now – safely," he adds quickly.

He rolls his eyes while his mother laughs, and finally resorts to pushing between them to head towards the aforementioned car while his mother yells after him about sunscreen.

While Steve is right that most of the party is with them, the people Mike meant by 'everyone' are indeed already at the Harrington house (which is admittedly pretty big, and has a pool) when they pull up. Will and El are out of their respective family's vehicles and are sitting in the grass going through one of Will's sketchbooks. The Chief and Ms. Byers are leaning against the Byers' car, talking to each other - though Mike sees that at least one of the adults is looking at Will and El at any given time.

"The party is here!" Dustin and Steve say at the same time (and probably don't mean the same thing by 'party'), as Mike, Max, and Lucas detangle themselves from seatbelts in the back (Dustin got front seat because of course he did).

El looks up from the sketchbook, her smile lighting up her whole face when she sees him. It's been over a month since she's last been out, and it feels like forever again. Mike sometimes feels like that is cheapening the entire *year* they spent without each other, but it doesn't make him feel it any less. Now that he has her again, separation feels even more unbearable.

"Hi Mike," she says when he reaches her. "Hi everyone," she adds before Max can inevitably make a comment about how they were there too.

"Hi El," he says, probably smiling as wide as she is. "What was Will showing you?"

"I'm doing updated drawings of the party, to include El and Max," Will says.

"I want mage robes," El adds, looking back at him.

"I drew you in mage robes," Will says.

"No," she says. "Real life mage robes." She gestures to herself.

Mike, already grinning at the two of them (their friendship makes him extremely happy), takes a minute to imagine El dressed as a mage. A real mage. He's stuck between the image being badass or adorable. She'd probably be both, in a way only she can be.

El cocks her head in confusion and he realizes he's staring at her as he pictures her as a mage. He shakes his head, blushing. "I'd say you could ask the Chief for them but he doesn't know anything about D&D." He won't tell her he's already thinking about Christmas for her now.

"Come on, idiots! All the fun stuff is out back!" Dustin calls, having already made it to the now open door.

"We *brought* the fun stuff!" Will calls back, getting to his feet.

"We brought sparklers," El tells Mike seriously. "I don't know what they are, though."

"They're like little fireworks," Mike tells her, taking her hand to help her up and then keeping it. "They're fun." He pauses and adds, "Have you seen fireworks?"

"I saw the ones on the TV. For New Years," she says. "I like the colors and the light. Fun."

Mike squeezes her hand gently. "Well come on, then. We'll get you a sparkler."

Notes for the Chapter:

The beginning to the latter half of this chapter, with Steve picking Mike up to take him and the other boys to some hangout or another (where they meet up with El), is honestly how I want Season 3 to start.